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ABSTRACT

Noting that the most assistance adults can provide to a child during a disaster is to be calm, honest, and caring, this brochure provides suggestions for helping children cope with natural and other disasters. The brochure details how children's typical reactions vary with their age, describes how families can prepare for disasters, and suggests ways to meet children's emotional needs by creating a reassuring environment after experiencing a disaster. How to teach children to call for help if needed is also outlined. In addition, the pamphlet lists five additional publications available on disaster preparedness. (KB)

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Helping Children Cope with Disaster

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Holly Harrington

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Helping Children Cope with Disaster

Federal Emergency Management Agency

American Red Cross

Children may respond to disaster by demonstrating increased anxiety or emotional and behavioral problems. Some younger children may return to earlier behavior patterns, such as bed wetting and separation anxiety. Older children may react to physical and emotional disruptions with aggression or withdrawal. Even children who have only indirect contact with the disaster may have unresolved feelings.

In most cases, such responses are temporary. As time passes, symptoms usually ease. However, high winds, sirens or other reminders of the emotions associated with the disaster may cause anxiety to return.

Children imitate the way adults cope with emergencies. They can detect adults' uncertainty and grief. Adults can make disasters less traumatic for children by maintaining a sense of control over the situation. The most assistance you can provide a child is to be calm, honest, and caring.

A Child's Reaction to Disaster by Age

Below are some common physical and emotional reactions in children after a disaster or traumatic event:

BIRTH TO 2 YEARS — When children are pre-verbal and experience a trauma, they do not have the words to describe the event or their feelings. However, they can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells. Infants may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event that occurred several years in the past and was seemingly forgotten.

PRESCHOOL - 2 TO 6 YEARS — Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. Because of their age and small size, they lack the ability to protect themselves or others. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity. Preschoolers cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss. They see consequences as being reversible. In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may involve aspects of the event. They may reenact the incident or the disaster over and over again.

SCHOOL AGE - 8 TO 10 YEARS — The school-age child has the ability to understand the permanence of loss. Some children become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with the child's concentration at school and academic performance may decline. School-aged children may display a wide range of reactions — guilt, feelings of failure, anger that the event was not prevented, or fantasies of playing rescuer.

PRE-ADOLESCENCE TO ADOLESCENCE - 11 TO 18 YEARS — As children grow older, their responses begin to resemble adults' reaction to trauma. They combine some more childlike reactions with others that seem more consistent with adult reactions. Survival of trauma can be equated with a sense of immortality. A teenager may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behavior, such as reckless driving or alcohol or drug use. In contrast, a teenager can become fearful of leaving home. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. After a trauma, the world can seem dangerous and unsafe. A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions, and yet feel unable to discuss them with relatives.

(Information courtesy of the American Red Cross and the University of Illinois)

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PREPAREDNESS HELPS

Preparing for disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disaster can happen, and provides an opportunity to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs after disaster. Preparedness includes:

- Talking about damage that may be caused by disasters that can strike in your area of the country.
- Deciding on a number to call and a place where the family will reunite if separated by a disaster.
- Pulling together supplies of basic items: food, water, battery, radio, flashlight, etc.
- Selecting valued personal items for each member of the family to take if you are required to leave your home. For a child, such items may include a favorite toy, blanket or other item that the child uses as a source of comfort when upset.
- Safeguarding personal possessions with emotional importance such as photographs, family heirlooms, baby books, or other items that can't be replaced. Be sure to include one or two items that your child is especially proud of.

Meeting the Child's Emotional Needs

Children usually take their lead in a situation by reading the emotions of adults. Adults should share their true feelings about the incident, but maintain a sense of calm for the child's sense of well-being.

Listen to what the child is saying. If a young child is asking questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. If a child has difficulty expressing feelings, allow the child to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened.

Try to understand what is causing anxieties and fears. Be aware that following a disaster, children are most afraid that —

- The event will happen again
- Someone will be killed
- They will be separated from the family
- They will be left alone

REASSURE CHILDREN WITH COMPASSION AND UNDERSTANDING. Suggestions to help:

- Hug and touch your children.
- Calmly and firmly provide factual information about the recent disaster.
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings. Be honest about your own.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime.
- Re-establish a schedule for work, play, meals and rest.
- Involve your children by giving them specific chores to help them feel they are helping to restore family and community life.
- Encourage your children to help develop a family disaster plan.
- Make sure your children know what to do when they hear smoke detectors, fire alarms, and local community warning systems such as horns or sirens.
- Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
- Understand that your children will need to mourn their own losses.

You've tried to create a reassuring environment. If your children do not respond when you follow the suggestions listed above, seek help from an appropriate professional such as the child's primary care physician, a mental health provider specializing in children's needs or a member of the clergy.

Emergency Phone Numbers

My Family Name:

My Phone Number:

My Address:

My Town:

My County:

Ambulance

Fire

Police/Sheriff

Mother

Father

Other

Teaching Your Children How to Call for Help

Teach children how and when to call for help. They should call 9-1-1 if you live in a 9-1-1-service area. If not, check the telephone directory for local emergency numbers.

Post the numbers near the telephone, clearly visible to children. Even very young children can learn how and when to call for emergency assistance.

If your child can read numbers but not words, the chart on this page has pictures that may help the child to find the right number to call.

As you explain each picture, have your child color the symbol on the chart. Doing so may help your child remember who to ask for in an emergency.

Federal Emergency Management Agency

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Learn More

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Community & Family Preparedness Program and the American Red Cross are engaged in nationwide efforts to help people prepare for disasters.

They provide the following additional publications on disaster preparedness:

- **"YOUR FAMILY DISASTER PLAN"** (FEMA L191) (ARC 4466)
- **"EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS CHECKLIST"** (FEMA L154) (ARC 4471)
- **"YOUR FAMILY DISASTER SUPPLIES KIT"** (FEMA L189) (ARC 4463)
- **"DISASTER PREPAREDNESS COLORING BOOK"** [ages 3-10] (FEMA 243) (ARC 2200)
- **"ADVENTURES OF THE DISASTER DUDES"** [Video and Presenter's Guide for use by an adult with children ages 9-11] (FEMA 242) (ARC 5024)

For more information, please contact your local emergency management office or American Red Cross chapter. This brochure and other preparedness materials are available by calling FEMA at 1-800-480-2520, or writing:

FEMA
P.O. BOX 2012
JESSUP, MD 20794-2012

or by visiting your local Red Cross chapter.

Publications are also available on the World Wide Web at:

FEMA:
http://www.fema.gov
American Red Cross:
http://www.redcross.org

Your Local Contact is:

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HURRICANE • FIRE • HAZARDOUS MATERIALS SPILL

Federal Emergency Management Agency

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This brochure offers parents and other adults suggestions to help children before, during and after a disaster.

Helping Children Cope with Disaster

TORNADO • FLASH FLOOD • EARTHQUAKE • WINTER STORM

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